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July 2016 | Volume **58** | Number **7**

**Syllabus-ted: Preparing Students for the Rigors of College Reading**

## Syllabus-ted: Preparing Students for the Rigors of College Reading

*Laura Varlas*

**Why do students perform well in high school but hit an academic wall during their first year of college? Synchronicity on reading expectations could put K-12 and higher ed on the same page.**

The problem requires a little reading between the lines: Students do well on their ACT or SAT tests, says Margaret Ferguson, an English professor at the University of California, Davis. But when they get to college, they can't do the work. Experts say reading is the key to unlocking college success. So why does college reading send students into a tailspin?



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## Stalling at the 13th Year

In 2013, the Nation's Report Card, or NAEP, began using a metric to determine the percentage of students academically prepared for college—meaning they should be able to do first-year college work without needing remedial courses. On the most recent NAEP, only 37 percent of high school seniors scored at the college-ready level in both reading and math.

Nationally, one in five first-year college students must take remedial courses, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. When disaggregated for community college students, low-income students, or students of color, the rates are much higher. Elizabeth Gonsalves, a PARCC fellow and English department head at Abington High School in Massachusetts, notes that about one-third of the students in her state arrive on college campuses needing remedial work in math and English. In community college, that rises to 60 percent.

Remedial classes cost money and don't count toward a degree, which compounds opportunity gaps for students from low-income families. Gonsalves says the data in Massachusetts show that students who take one remedial course don't graduate on time. If they take two courses, they're less likely to complete a degree program at all. "Having to complete remedial work is discouraging, expensive, and puts students off track for the careers they hope to have," she says. "So I'm really invested in knowing what colleges want our students to be able to read."

With clearer channels for communication between college and secondary schools, educators are adapting their approaches to better prepare students for the rigors of the 13th year.

## Looking for an Argument

Students read many rigorous texts in high school, but experts say volume, variety, and vocabulary set college reading expectations apart from traditional high school curriculum. This higher bar means students need to walk off the stage at graduation not just with a diploma, but also with strategies for reading different types of texts.

"The main thing I see is that students think they are reading for information, whereas I think they are reading for argument," says Patricia Michaelson, a literature professor at the University of Texas, Dallas. "That's true in all content areas." Michaelson cites Indiana University professor David Pace, whose studies of his own history students revealed that they were reading to memorize the facts in historical texts, not for the big picture. Historians, on the other hand, "look for the argument and try to remember one or two examples that will help them remember the argument," explains Michaelson.

Donna Pasternak, who teaches English education at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, sees similar problems in literature: "There's a tendency to approach all texts in the same way—looking for the summary, identifying characters, and other general info. [Analyzing] why characters did something and their reasoning behind it is much more important than being able to recall their names."

Part of the problem, Pasternak acknowledges, is the trickle-down influence of multiple-choice assessments. "What's easy to assess turns out to be the minutiae of a text." In response to this disconnect, Abington High School revamped its English exams to focus on synthesis rather than recall-based questions.

## Reading for Relationships

Not only is the purpose for reading often different in college, but so are the types of texts students encounter. To help students gain fluency with an array of sources, high school teachers are introducing more expository readings and asking students to notice relationships among texts. Gonsalves says this marks a shift for high school reading.

"We'd take on one text at a time, test a lot for comprehension, and maybe in upper-level courses, test for analysis or synthesis," she says. "But 85 percent of our students are going to

college. They all need to be able to compare texts and use multiple sources to support a claim

On assessments, Gonsalves says she'll present students with different types of readings—for example, the *New York Times*' "Room for Debate" column, a Wikipedia entry, and a political cartoon—and ask a question that requires students to synthesize the arguments in each source into a written response. To be able to write it, they first have to be able to read it, Gonsalves says. She opens up the spectrum of what's considered a text, from novels to podcasts to infographics, and has kids practice taking these texts apart, putting them back together, and building new ideas in the process.

Exposing students to new types of texts has the added benefit of familiarizing them with Tier-2 or subject-specific, vocabulary. "College reading presumes a knowledge of vocabulary that many students don't have," notes Thomas Newkirk, professor of English at the University of New Hampshire. "Terms like *the political left* and *the political right*—authors assume you know what they mean by that." However, he offers, if students regularly read short *Harper's* articles, pieces by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, and other op-ed commentary, they will begin to absorb the nuanced vocabulary.

## Conversations with Texts

Then there's the challenge that students "often come to college more familiar with the types of reading where the narrative takes control, and the reading seems to move on its own," Newkirk explains. Gonsalves says this encourages passive reading.

"In college, you have analytic reading or narratives that are not straightforward," he adds, like William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. "You have to develop real strategies for reading those types of texts." For example, students need to be able to find the heart of a complex passage. Newkirk suggests asking students to locate five or six key words in a text, justify why they are essential, and expand upon what they think the author means by those words.

Gonsalves says reading in her school is now about creating back-and-forth conversations between students and texts. Cornell notes are again in vogue as a way to synthesize a reading. Additionally, Gonsalves says her department's budget reflects a new emphasis. "I see teachers asking for more colored highlighters so that students can code text, sticky notes for annotating, and individual dictionaries. This is all so students can go more deeply and slowly in texts."

## The *Christmas Carol* Effect

Slowing down may seem counterintuitive to first-year college students who are feeling the crush of reading requirements. "A lot of kids will say, I need to speed read," relates Gonsalves. But she and Newkirk agree that the last thing you want to say to a student struggling with a text is "just skim it." Newkirk says teachers can help students slow down by focusing on closely reading beginnings, endings, or any parts of a text that seem to summarize it. He suggests

reading the first two paragraphs of a piece as a class, and asking questions like, "Why do you think this person took this position?" or "What do you think is going to happen?"

High school students need to understand that rereading is acceptable and required, says Gonsalves. "Rereading is really how you master a text," explains Michaelson. When she teaches *Beowulf*, most of her students will say, "Oh yeah, we've read that." But when she asks them what they remember, it's little to nothing. "I'd rather students read with more depth and [be] held accountable for the text, rather than read widely and not remember anything," Michaelson laments.

She wants students to achieve what she calls the "*Christmas Carol* effect." "If you read or watch *Christmas Carol* every year, you know that text," she says. "But if you read a text once and never approach it again, it just doesn't stick." In addition to rereading, Michaelson borrows strategies from K-12 pedagogy to activate students' background knowledge. "I'll ask whether they've read other books with this type of narrator or what else they've read from the same period."

## Crucial Conversations

The conversation about college-ready reading should include all K-16 teachers. "English teachers are not the only people teaching reading or textual analysis," says Pasternak. At Abington High School, science students read journal articles and write reviews, and history students work with primary source documents and analyze different historians' treatments of events.

"We need to get all grade levels scaffolded toward a college reading goal," advises Pasternak. Through a recently launched [K-16 Alliances](#) website, the Modern Language Association (MLA) is creating a platform for college and K-12 educators to connect to do just that. On the site, educators can share writing prompts, syllabi, and strategies for working with complex texts.


College partnerships take the guesswork out of preparation, agrees Gonsalves, whose school has shifted its reading and writing curriculum toward more rhetorical and nonfiction texts. "If you don't have these types of conversations, you go on teaching British Literature in grade 12, and students aren't prepared to read and write expository texts."

Soon after partnering with local colleges like Bridgewater State University, her department changed the senior English requirement, for all non-AP students, to include a semester-long course on expository writing. Students read classic and student-written exemplars of rhetorical writing and analyze craft and structure to determine how to write in a similar fashion. As the course has evolved, the emphasis on reading strategies has grown. "Initially, the focus was on writing until we realized that reading is really the key," says Gonsalves. "A lot of college instructors send their kids to the writing center when what they really need is reading help."

## A Two-Way Street

The MLA's K–16 Alliances website includes practices developed by teachers to support college-ready reading across the K–16 continuum. The partnership is not about higher ed bestowing its wisdom on K–12, Ferguson expounds. "The point is, we need to work together to devise better methods at all levels," says Pasternak.

For example, Pasternak uses a popular elementary school reading strategy—the prediction exercise, "Probable Passage"—to establish a purpose for her college-level readers. And in her children's lit course, she provides graphic organizers to help students with reading comprehension. "K–16 collaboration can illuminate what we're doing at the 2nd grade level that is still of value at the university level, because it's just good reading practice. And then, we can use these strategies to move into more complex texts," she continues. "If we're all invested in what college reading is, we have a better opportunity to support and scaffold it."

Gonsalves notes that now, only 5 percent of Abington students take remedial English in college. With university collaboration, she's working to get that number to zero. "One of the nicest gifts ever received was a college syllabus, with a task and a prompt, from every freshman writing teacher," she recalls. "When my department saw what those were, we knew we had to make changes because we weren't preparing our seniors for college reading and writing. We're happy with our decision." 

**Laura Varlas** is the managing editor of *ASCD Express*.

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